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The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution

By Paul Avrich

"THE urge to destroy is also a creative urge." Bakunin wrote these words in 1842, and Russian anarchists yearned ever after for a social revolution that would sweep away the tsarist order and usher in the stateless millennium. In February 1917, this long-cherished dream seemed at last to be coming true. When rebellion erupted in Petrograd and brought the monarchy to dust, the anarchists jubilantly hailed it as the spontaneous upheaval which Bakunin had forecast some seventy-five years before. The complete breakdown of authority convinced them that the Golden Age had arrived, and they threw themselves into the task of eliminating what remained of the state and transferring the land and the factories to the common people.

In a matter of weeks, anarchist federations were created in Petrograd and Moscow, with the aim of transforming the twin capitals into egalitarian communes modelled on an idealized image of the Paris Commune of 1871, an event consecrated in anarchist legend. "Through a Social Revolution to the Anarchist Commune" was their watchword—a revolution designed to remove government and property, prisons and barracks, money and profits, and then to inaugurate a stateless society founded on the voluntary cooperation of free individuals. "Hail anarchy! Make the parasites, rulers, and priests—deceivers all—tremble!"¹

As the revolution gathered momentum, the movement spread swiftly to other cities and towns. In most locations, the anarchist groups fell into three categories: Anarchist-Communists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, and Individualist Anarchists. The Anarchist-Communists, drawing their inspiration from Bakunin and Kropotkin, envisioned a free federation of communities in which

¹*Volnyi Kronshtadt*, 12 October 1917, p. 4.

each member would be rewarded according to his needs. Viewing the millennium in a romantic mirror which reflected a pre-industrial Russia of agricultural communes and handicrafts cooperatives, they had little use for large-scale industry or bureaucratic labor organizations. In the turmoil following the February Revolution, they proceeded to confiscate a number of private residences—the most important were the Petrograd *dacha* of P. P. Durnovo and the old Merchants' Club in Moscow (which was rechristened the House of Anarchy)—as headquarters for their egalitarian communes.

The Anarcho-Syndicalists, on the other hand, pinned their hopes on the factory committees as the nuclei of the future libertarian society. The prospect of a new world centered around industrial production did not repel them in the least. Indeed, at times they exhibited an almost futuristic devotion to the cult of the machine. Theirs was the Westernizers' admiration for technological progress, in contrast to the Slavophile longing of the Anarchist-Communists for an irretrievable age that perhaps had never existed in the first place. Yet the Syndicalists did not yield to an uncritical worship of mass production. Deeply influenced by Bakunin and Kropotkin, they anticipated the danger that man might be trapped in the gears and levers of a centralized industrial machine. They too looked backward for a way out, to a decentralized society of labor organizations in which the workers could truly be masters of their own fate. With their slogan of "workers' control," the Syndicalists came to exert an influence in the factory committees quite out of proportion to their numbers. But because they repudiated a centralized party apparatus they were never in a position to lead the working class on a broad scale. In the end, it was left for the Bolsheviks, who were equipped not only with an effective party organization but also with a conscious will to power that the Syndicalists lacked, to capture the allegiance of the industrial workers in the factory committees and trade unions.

The Individualist Anarchists rejected both the territorial

communes of the Anarchist-Communists and the workers' organizations of the Syndicalists. Only unorganized individuals, they believed, were safe from coercion and domination and thus capable of remaining true to the ideals of anarchism. Taking their cue from Nietzsche and Max Stirner, they exalted the ego over and above the claims of collective entities and in some cases exhibited a distinctly aristocratic style of thought and action. Anarcho-Individualism attracted a small following of bohemian artists and intellectuals, and occasional lone-wolf bandits who found expression for their social alienation in violence and crime, with death as the ultimate form of self-affirmation, the ultimate escape from the constricting fabric of organized society. Here and there, by contrast, groups of Tolstoyans preached the gospel of Christian non-violence, and though they had few ties with the revolutionary anarchists their moral impact on the movement was considerable.

For all the anarchist groups—Anarchist-Communists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, Individualists—the great hopes stirred up by the February Revolution soon turned into bitter disappointment. The monarchy had been overthrown, and yet the state was left standing. What had taken place in February? asked an anarchist journal in Rostov-on-Don. “Nothing special. In place of Nicholas the Bloody, Kerensky the Bloody has mounted the throne.”² The anarchists could not rest until the Provisional Government, like its tsarist predecessor, had been swept away. Before long, they found themselves making common cause with their ideological adversaries, the Bolsheviks, the only other radical group in Russia pressing for the immediate destruction of the “bourgeois” state.

The intense hostility long felt by the anarchists towards Lenin dissipated rapidly as 1917 moved forward. Impressed by a series of ultra-radical statements Lenin had been making since his return to Russia, some anarchists came to believe that the Bolshevik leader had shed the straitjacket of Marxism for a new

²*Anarkhist* (Rostov), 22 October 1917, p. 3.

theory of revolution quite like their own. Lenin's April Theses, for example, contained an array of iconoclastic propositions that anarchist thinkers had long cherished: the transformation of the "predatory imperialist" war into a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist order; the renunciation of parliamentary government in favor of a regime of soviets patterned after the Paris Commune; the abolition of the police, the army, and the bureaucracy; the leveling of incomes.³ Although Lenin's preoccupation with the seizure of power gave pause to some, more than a few anarchists found his views sufficiently harmonious with their own to serve as a basis of cooperation. Whatever suspicions they still harbored were for the moment put aside. Lenin's appeal for "a breakup and a revolution a thousand times more powerful than that of February"⁴ had a distinctly Bakuninist ring and was precisely what most anarchists wanted to hear. Indeed, one anarchist leader in Petrograd was convinced that Lenin intended to inaugurate anarchism by "withering away the state" the moment he got hold of it.⁵

Thus it happened that, during the eight months separating the two revolutions of 1917, both the anarchists and the Bolsheviks were bending their efforts towards the same goal, the destruction of the Provisional Government. Though a degree of wariness persisted on both sides, a prominent anarchist noted that on most vital questions there existed "a perfect parallelism" between the two groups.⁶ Their slogans—"Down with the war! Down with the Provisional Government! Control of the factories to the workers! The land to the peasants!"—were often identical, and there even developed a certain camaraderie between the long-time antagonists engendered by their common purpose. When a Marxist lecturer told an audience of factory workers in Petrograd that the anarchists were disrupting the solidarity

³V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniya*, 2nd ed., 31 vols., Moscow, 1931-35, XX, 76-83.

⁴*Leninskii sbornik*, 35 vols., Moscow, 1924-45, IV, 290.

⁵Bertram D. Wolfe, Introduction to John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, New York, 1960, p. xxxi.

⁶Voline, *La Révolution inconnue (1917-1921)*, Paris, 1943, p. 185.

of Russian labor, an irate listener shouted, "That's enough! The anarchists are our friends!" A second voice, however, was heard to mutter, "God save us from such friends!"⁷

Although the anarchists and Bolsheviks were united in their determination to overthrow the Provisional Government, discord arose between them over the question of timing. During the spring and summer of 1917, Anarchist-Communist militants in the capital and at Kronstadt pressed for an immediate rising, while the Petrograd Bolshevik Committee argued that the moment was not yet ripe, that an undisciplined outburst by anarchists and rank-and-file Bolsheviks would be easily crushed, causing irreparable damage to the party and the revolution. The Anarchist-Communists, however, would have no truck with the temporizing of any political group, the Bolsheviks included. Impatient for the millennium, they pushed ahead with their plans for an armed insurrection. Anarchist agitators exhorted their listeners to revolt without further delay, assuring them that no assistance was needed from political organizations "for the February Revolution also took place without the leadership of a party."⁸

The anarchists did not have long to wait. On July 3, crowds of soldiers, Kronstadt sailors, and workmen erupted into open rebellion in the capital, demanding that the Petrograd Soviet assume power (though the anarchists among them were more interested in destroying the state than in transferring the reins of authority to the soviets). The Petrograd Soviet, however, refused to endorse the premature rising, and after a few days of sporadic disturbances the rioters were suppressed. It would be an exaggeration to call the July Days an "anarchist creation," as did one speaker at an anarchist conference in 1918.⁹ On the other hand, the role of the anarchists should not be minimized.

⁷*Novaya Zhizn*, 15 November 1917, p. 1.

⁸Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (13 vols. in 1), Ann Arbor, 1957, II, 82.

⁹*Burevestnik*, 11 April 1918, p. 2.

Together with rank-and-file Bolsheviks and unaffiliated radicals, they acted as gadflies, goading the soldiers, sailors, and workers into the abortive revolt.

In the wake of the July Days, the fears of the Bolshevik Committee were in part realized, as leaders of the party were arrested or forced into hiding. The Bolsheviks, however, were far from being crushed. Indeed, by October they were strong enough to launch their successful insurrection against the Kerensky regime, an insurrection in which the anarchists once again were among the most energetic participants. (There were at least four anarchist members of the Bolshevik-dominated Military Revolutionary Committee, which engineered the *coup d'état* of October 25.) Disregarding the preachments of Bakunin and Kropotkin against political *coups*, the anarchists took part in a seizure of power in the belief that power, once captured, could somehow be diffused and eliminated.

Scarcely a day had passed, however, before they began to have second thoughts. On October 26, when the Bolsheviks proclaimed a new "Soviet government" and created a central Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) composed exclusively of members of their own party, the anarchists recalled the warnings of Bakunin and Kropotkin that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would really mean "the dictatorship of the Social Democratic party."¹⁰ At once they began to protest, arguing that such a concentration of political power would destroy the social revolution begun in February. The success of the revolution, they insisted, hinged on the decentralization of political and economic authority. The soviets and factory committees must remain decentralized units, free from the domination of party bosses or so-called people's commissars. If any political group should attempt to convert them into instruments of coercion, the people must be ready to take up arms once more.¹¹

Anarchist circles in Petrograd were soon buzzing with talk

¹⁰*Svobodnaia Kommuna*, 2 October 1917, p. 2.

¹¹*Golos Truda*, 3 November 1917, p. 1.

of “a third and last stage of the revolution,” a final struggle between “Social Democratic power and the creative spirit of the masses, between the authoritarian and libertarian systems, between the Marxist principle and the anarchist principle.”¹² There were ominous murmurings among the Kronstadt sailors to the effect that, if the new *Sovnarkom* dared betray the revolution, the cannons that took the Winter Palace would take Smolny (headquarters of the Bolshevik government) as well. “Where authority begins, there the revolution ends!”¹³

The grievances of the anarchists accumulated rapidly. On November 2, the new government published a Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, which affirmed the “inalienable right” of every nationality to express its self-determination by establishing an independent state. For the anarchists, this represented a step backwards, a retreat from the internationalist and stateless ideal. By the spring of 1918, a new political police, the *Cheka*, had been established, the land had been nationalized, the factory committees had been subordinated to a state-controlled network of trade unions—in short, a “commissar-state” had been erected, “the ulcer of our time,” as the Kharkov Anarchist-Communist Association acridly described it.¹⁴ According to an anonymous anarchist pamphlet of this period, the concentration of authority in the hands of the *Sovnarkom*, the *Cheka*, and the *Vesenkha* (Supreme Economic Council) had cut short all hope for a free Russia: “Bolshevism, day by day and step by step, proves that state power possesses inalienable characteristics; it can change its label, its ‘theory,’ and its servitors, but in essence it merely remains power and despotism in new forms.”¹⁵

The Paris Commune, once invoked as the ideal society to replace the Provisional Government, now became the anarchist answer to Lenin’s dictatorship. The industrial workers were told to “reject the words, orders, and decrees of the commissars”

¹²Voline, *La Révolution inconnue*, pp. 190-91.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 200; *Golos Truda*, 4 November 1917, p. 1.

¹⁴*Bezvlastie*, March 1918, p. 1.

¹⁵*Velikii opyt* (n.p., 1918).

and to create their own libertarian communes after the model of 1871.¹⁶ At the same time, the anarchists had equal scorn for the “parliamentary fetishism” of the Kadets, SRs, and Mensheviks, and it is a fitting symbol that an anarchist sailor from Kronstadt, Anatolii Zhelezniakov, should have led the detachment which dispersed the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, ending its life of a single day.¹⁷

The stream of invective against the Soviet government reached a peak in February 1918, when the Bolsheviks resumed their peace negotiations with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. Anarchists joined with other “internationalists” of the left—left SRs, Menshevik Internationalists, left Communists—to protest against any accommodation with German “imperialism.” To Lenin’s contention that the Russian Army was too exhausted to fight any longer, the anarchists replied that professional armies were obsolete in any case, that the defense of the revolution was now the mission of the popular masses organized in partisan detachments. A leading Anarchist-Communist, Alexander Ge, spoke out vehemently against the conclusion of a peace treaty: “The Anarchist-Communists proclaim terror and partisan warfare on two fronts. It is better to die for the worldwide socialist revolution than to live as a result of an agreement with German imperialism.”¹⁸ The Anarchist-Communists and their Syndicalist comrades argued that bands of guerrilla fighters, organized spontaneously in the localities, would harass and demoralize the invaders, ultimately destroying them just as Napoleon’s army had been destroyed in 1812. Volin, a Syndicalist leader, sketched this strategy in vivid terms: “The whole task is to hold on. To resist. Not to yield. To fight. To wage relentless partisan warfare—here and there and everywhere. To advance. Or falling back, to destroy. To torment, to harass, to prey upon the enemy.”¹⁹

¹⁶*Burevestnik*, 9 April 1918, p. 2.

¹⁷Voline, *La Révolution inconnue*, p. 211.

¹⁸*Pravda*, 25 February 1918, p. 2.

¹⁹Volin, *Revoliutsiya i anarkhizm*, Kharkov, 1919, p. 127.

But the appeals of the anarchists fell on deaf ears. The Brest-Litovsk treaty, even harsher than Ge and Volin had feared, was signed by the Bolshevik delegation on March 3, 1918. Lenin insisted that the agreement, severe as it was, provided a desperately needed breathing spell which would enable his party to consolidate the revolution and then carry it forward. For the outraged anarchists, however, the treaty was a humiliating capitulation to the forces of reaction, a betrayal of the world-wide revolution. It was indeed an "obscene peace," they said, echoing Lenin's own description.²⁰ When the Fourth Congress of Soviets convened on March 14 to ratify the treaty, Alexander Ge and his fellow anarchist delegates (there were 14 in all) voted in opposition.²¹

The dispute over the treaty of Brest-Litovsk brought into relief the growing estrangement between the anarchists and the Bolshevik party. With the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October 1917, their marriage of convenience had accomplished its purpose. By the spring of 1918, the majority of anarchists had become sufficiently disillusioned with Lenin to seek a complete break, while the Bolsheviks, for their part, had begun to contemplate the suppression of their former allies, who had outlived their usefulness and whose incessant criticisms were a nuisance the new regime no longer had to tolerate. The anarchists, moreover, beyond their irritating verbal assaults, were beginning to present a more tangible danger. Partly in preparation for the anticipated guerrilla war against the Germans, and partly to discourage hostile maneuvers by the Soviet government, local anarchist clubs had been organizing detachments of "Black Guards" (the black banner was the anarchist emblem) armed with rifles, pistols, and grenades.

An open break occurred in April 1918, when the *Cheka* launched a campaign to remove the more dangerous anarchist cells from Moscow and Petrograd. In protest, the anarchists

²⁰*Bolshevistskaya diktatura v svete anarkhizma*, Paris, 1928, p. 10.

²¹*Izvestiya VTsIK*, 17 March 1918, p. 2; Lenin, *Sochineniya*, XXII, 618.

cried out that the Bolsheviks were a caste of self-seeking intellectuals who had betrayed the masses and the revolution. Political power, they declared, always corrupts those who wield it and robs the people of their freedom. But if the Golden Age was slipping from their grasp, the anarchists refused to despair. They clung tenaciously to the belief that ultimately their vision of a stateless utopia would triumph. "Let us fight on," they proclaimed, "and our slogan shall be 'The Revolution is dead! Long live the Revolution.'"²²

²²G. P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work*, Chicago, 1940, p. 23.